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PREACH THE WORD

Church methods always threaten to obscure the church's message. We can see this as we look back over the past. We need to see it just now when we are sorely tempted to mistake activity for spiritual efficiency. Is there not danger that we are teaching people how to make other people happy without insisting that they shall be better? May we not be telling them how to hold church picnics and conduct Boy Scout troops without deepening their convictions in God and immortality? May we not be teaching people how to save society without any great conviction that society is worth saving? Is it not possible that we may be learning how to teach without giving much attention to what we teach?

Without minimizing the importance of training in method, it is the imperative duty of the church to reaffirm its fundamental conviction.

We are reasserting the necessity of doing justice to nations and unprivileged people. Can the church publish only the message of the labor union and the reform society and the philanthropic organization? If so, it has no great reason for existence. It is not a first-rate educational institution. Its methods are too often amateurish imitations of those of the school. But it has a unique duty to utter its characteristic message; for if what the church believes about God, human welfare, and the ultimate basis of right is true, the sooner people are persuaded to accept the belief the better.



Technique waits at the door of the church hand in hand with cant. Just as it is easier to write books on child study than it is to raise children, it is easier to give the history of a conviction

than to bring the conviction home to the rank and file of people. Technique is always alluring both to the worker and to the critic of work. Devotion to technique too often deadens the inspiration of the painter and the musician. The doing of tasks efficiently too often displaces an absorbing conviction as to the worth of the tasks to be done.



Important as it is to build up efficient religious institutions and methods, it is to be borne in mind that they really depend upon the religious message. A preacher without a message is like a fire where coals have been reduced to clinkers. Continuous heat means repeated additions of fuel. Sunday-school and parish work, men's clubs, caring for the poor, can never replace the fundamental religious convictions. Take those away, and any church will begin to disintegrate as an institution. Church methods are indispensable forms of expression and a means of perpetuating convictions. But Christianity is more than methods. It has a message of a God of love in a universe of law, of an incomparable ideal, of a success that is not to be prevented by those who refuse for themselves to meet its conditions.



This message needs to be constantly repeated. The church is an asset or a liability in proportion to its willingness to herald its message of God and his presence. If it preaches the failure of God as a spiritual power in history and the necessity of his destroying forever the lives he could not transform, then the church is a social liability—one of the burdens to be carried by those who really believe in the saving power of God in history.

If, however, the church can make plain to the world how God is always in his world, how inevitably injustice brings sorrow, how personality is the only supreme test of economic development, how righteousness exalts a nation, and how it is better to give justice than to fight for rights, the church is a supreme social asset. As it persuades men to believe in the spiritual progress assured by loyalty to its message, it is laying the foundation for that better social order for which we all yearn but of which we too often despair.